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Suburban Station Grounds

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*Boston & Albany Railroad*

SUBURBAN  
STATION  
GROUNDS

— By —

Charles Mulford Robinson

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## SUBURBAN STATION GROUNDS

By CHARLES MULFORD ROBINSON

TO the commuter using a suburban railway the erection of pretty stations and the beautifying of their grounds is a matter of great concern. It means the extension of the home atmosphere quite to the railroad track. When he steps off the train he is at home,—as far as the soothing calm of a lovely scene can make him,—without having still a quarter mile of dreary trudging before there comes heart's-ease.

There is something in this, for the commuter's ideas are expansive. His house is wider than if he were in town, and it has a little garden around it; but even this increase of space is not enough for him. Consider how the landed proprietors—heartless speculators or mere corporations though they be—have found it financially worth while, in the larger returns they get, to give to

the tract a pretty park-suggestive name; and so to lay out its streets and develop them that the whole district shall be garden-like and beautiful. It is not less to the railroad's interest than to that of the original proprietor of the land that the community should be well liked and populous. The railroad, then, is doing no more than its share, no more than it owes to itself, in making its part of the town—which is also the town's official entrance—attractive. And when it does this, it does much for the commuter;—its own gain is dependent upon his—pleasing even his expansive ideas. It makes his home seem

considerably nearer his office, and that means a great deal to railroad and to commuter.

But to the vast traveling public, whizzed through the suburban stations at unchecked speed, the attractiveness of the setting is really of very little moment. The through passengers at that time are thinking, in a distributive or collective way, of satchels and umbrellas, and if they should have a thought for architectural or gardening design as applied to railroad stations their study would reward them with little more than a blur. In hopeless jumble of name-sign and porte-

cochère, baggage truck and crimson Rambler, perspective and proportion would be annihilated. The travelers would be little wiser than if they had devoted themselves wholeheartedly to satchel and umbrella.

For this reason a discussion of how any particular

road has developed any particular stations is of general interest and value only in the suggestiveness of the examples. The question may be of immense interest to the commuters directly affected, and to the residents of the rival stations; but they make a small part of the traveling or the reading world. The applicability of the selected examples to other regions can alone make them of general interest.

This is the standpoint, then, from which properly to approach an account of how certain station grounds that are unusually successful have been developed. Such examples



WABAN STATION

BOSTON & ALBANY R.R.



## Suburban Station Grounds



BRIGHTON STATION

BOSTON & ALBANY R.R.

may be found on the New York Central's Boston and Albany division, the road that forms that division having been one of the pioneers in the work—gradually developed into an art—of beautifying station surroundings, having far distanced one of its contemporaries in the movement and having in permanence of effects outdone the other. Considered in this larger way, the study is full of suggestion and ought to have wide interest, for he who wills may learn—not merely what is here done, but what, under the like conditions, can be done. That makes the study personal and helpful.

The problem becomes simply this: A certain road is unusually successful in the artistic effect of its station gardens. These station grounds cannot, obviously, be all alike. They represent a great variety of topographical conditions. Given, then, this or that original condition of topography, what did the road do with it to attain such success? "House and Garden" has already had something to say regarding a few stations of the Newton Circuit, just around Boston.<sup>1</sup> Though these include some of the best on the road, it is not necessary to further touch upon them here.

A station that was not il-

lustrated in the previous article is Waban. Notice the pretty parklike effect here, and how much this is enhanced by the diagonal path that comes into the foreground of the picture. Two highways lead past the station. One crosses over the tracks at right angles, and to this the diagonal path leads, with effect far lovelier than if the ground between road and station had been cleared for an unnecessary little plaza. Behind the bushes—mainly bridal wreath, if one may trust the memory of a June day

when it was all abloom,—the carriage drive leads into the highway, at the corner of the station grounds. An alternative plan would have thrust the planting where the path now is, and have led the path beside the road to the station. That would have been drearily commonplace, and thus does little Waban offer a good example of the value of a daring imagination in the planning even of station grounds. The other highway is parallel to the tracks, and you can see how the driveway, curving beyond the porte-cochère, reaches it. A landscape architect does not consider a road as a thing to be emphasized any more than is necessary, and to get a good picture he has to define—or, in a measure shut in,—his design. Faithful adherence to an



WEST NEWTON STATION

BOSTON & ALBANY R.R.

<sup>1</sup> November, 1902.



## Suburban Station Grounds



WELLESLEY FARMS STATION

BOSTON & ALBANY R.R.

artistic conception, without permitting the railroad ideal of sheer directness, utility and dead level to intrude, seems to be the secret of the good effect here secured. The station grounds, small as they are, are like a little park. This suggests that the landscape architect must have been left very free. After the railroad engineers had finished their work he must have done his untrammelled. The policy of noninterference is to be kept in mind as a fundamental principle in observing the other station grounds that are noted.

On the other half of the Circuit, the main line half, are Brighton and the Newtons—places passed over with hardly a word in the earlier article. Yet they are interesting as illustrating the treatment of a type of topography that is not uncommon near large cities and that always seems difficult to handle artistically. Here four tracks cut a broad, relentless swath, and they are thrust through the towns at a level lower than the adjacent streets so that there may be no excuse for grade crossings. Between stations the sides of the cut are prettily planted, but the highway is paralleling the steam road at the top of the bank, leaving small space for gardening effects when a station is to be put in and a

retaining wall substituted for the slope of the earth. What shall be done with the problem?

At Brighton the highway dips a little, and the station has been put at its level, a flight of steps leading up from the railroad platform to the floor of the waiting-room. The retaining wall is brought frankly to the station, but at its top there are the bushes and shrubs of a little garden. This garden is beside the highway, with the stone station—charming from that side—as the center of the picture, and with no hint of the

less pleasant parts of a railroad. At West Newton, on the other hand, the station, which is of the older type, has been built at the track level. At what must have been considerable expense, the retaining wall has been pushed clear beyond the building, and a road has been brought down to the level of the station. There follows the familiar result of a station that is only an incident, and a slight one, in the course of the railroad, while it has no essential connection with the town to which it ought to mean so much. The illustration shows the pleasantly planted embankment; but this stops as the station is reached, is lower than the approach road—hence barely visible from it—and can be said to add no charm to the station sur-



THE POND AT WELLESLEY FARMS



## Suburban Station Grounds

roundings. It is merely making the best of a spoiled opportunity.

Beyond the Newton Circuit the Wellesleys are the first places reached. At Wellesley Farms, which is the first of the three, the highway is about parallel to the railroad, with the little station lying between. In the tract that separates highway and railroad there is a pond, and probably most railroad companies would promptly have filled it up. But once more a good landscape architect is glad to get not only hints, but all the help he can, from Nature; and when in this case she furnished so charming and unusual a feature as a pond on station grounds, he availed himself of the opportunity. There is certainly a sensible and widely practicable suggestion in this action. He has protected the little sheet of water by a tangled wild border, and since it was not in quite the most convenient place he has swung the highway sharply around so that, while skirting, it may not trespass upon the pond. The result? Wellesley Farms Station is unique, and to be remembered. It has the strongest sort of individuality, as almost every site in nature would have if it were given a chance. You can have no doubt that people grow actually to love it, and can



CHATHAM STATION

BOSTON & ALBANY R.R.

fancy little babies wheeled up and down there in their carriages—think of that, for a station on the main line of an important steam railroad! In this connection it should be observed, that as one comes to the station, the tracks themselves are quite “planted out.” It is not the landscape architect’s business to advertise steel rails and cinders. He does better than that for his road.

Next after Wellesley Farms is Wellesley Hills, and then comes Wellesley. There is at the latter place a condition that is extremely unusual, and one wholly delightful to a preacher of civic art, for a town center has been created and then made dignified and beautiful, and the station—the town’s official entrance—is a detail of the center.

To be sure, this detail has not been made so essential as it should be; it is not worked into the composition quite as one would wish; but the general effect is so very much better than usual and is so full of suggestiveness and inspiration that it well deserves study.

On the left, as one approaches Wellesley from Boston, and as the train slows down for the station, a park is seen. On one side of it is a pretty public building; and at the other side, among the shrubs and trees, is the not less attractive station. The

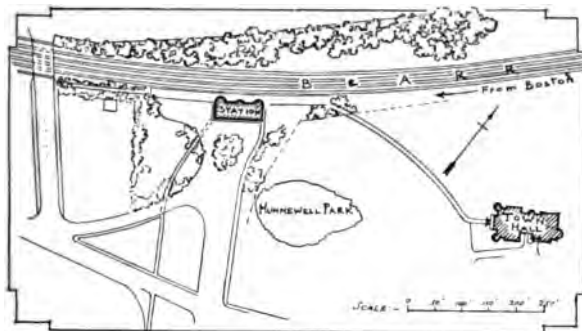


CANAAN STATION

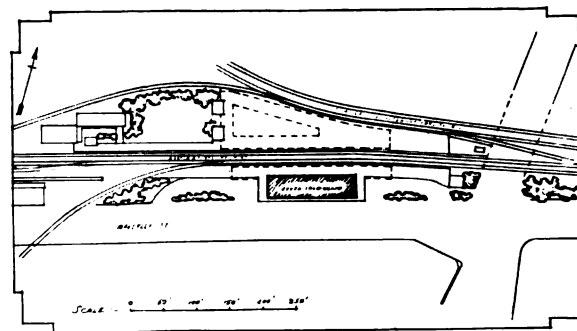
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## Suburban Station Grounds



PLAN SHOWING POSITION OF THE STATION AT  
WELLESLEY



PLAN SHOWING POSITION OF THE STATION AT  
SOUTH FRAMINGHAM

public building is the town hall, and connected with it is the Free Library which, with the park of some ten acres, was given to the town by Hollis H. Hunnewell. The structure is of stone with freestone trimmings, and the library portion alone cost \$60,000. Mr. Hunnewell provided further, however, a fund of \$20,000 for the care of the library and grounds; and, as the town adds something to this, they are kept in excellent condition. When the station is reached, it appears from the train exactly as if it were the little stone lodge to the park where centers the town's community life. This is just the effect it ought to have, and together buildings and park form a civic center. The result is something more than pleasing. It is satisfying, and it enhances the dignity of a community which to its other outward attractions adds, obviously, that great thing—a civic consciousness. If from the side of the town the effect is not quite so good—because the station has been rather “planted out” and minimized when, with the convergence of roads to it, it should have been emphasized and made a distinct accent or goal—the error is easily seen and the way of its correction is plain. The lesson that Wellesley teaches is as unmistakable as if the effect from the town were as surprisingly delightful as from the railroad, and even from the town side it is exceptionally good. With very slight changes the Wellesley approach could serve as a model.

Five minutes from Wellesley, which is to say a half hour from Boston, Natick is reached, and one discovers even from the car window that the city's suburbs have

been left behind. That, however, is incidental, for we are seeking hints and there are still lessons for suburban stations. The station is now decidedly the best looking building in sight, and a good deal of the town, one has to confess, is in sight. The grounds from the station to the main street form a perfect little garden, but, as far as one can see, its good example has had no effect. Even the railroad seems discouraged and the slopes of the cut are now abandoned to their natural dreariness. If Natick would brace up and make itself as attractive as the towns to the east of it, one feels sure that the railroad would extend its careful work—a reflection that suggests the reciprocal relation in this matter between a town and its railroad.

A few minutes more and an important junction is reached in South Framingham. Busy railroad junctions are seldom inviting, for art has such a deal to overcome that the obstacles seem to dishearten it. South Framingham is no exception in the restriction of the ground available for planting, but there is a very good building and wherever there does appear a corner that can be planted the opportunity is availed of. At Westboro, a little further on, a highway crossing the tracks at right angles suggests that the train shall stop well to one side. Again the considerable space between highway and station—crossed by path and road, neatly divided by shrubbery as at Waban—has been made a little park, the road turning back in a circle just beyond the station. North Grafton, the next station, offers an excellent contrast between the old method and the new. There are no grounds, and



A PLEASANT APPROACH TO  
LONGWOOD STATION

the wooden station is of the anciently familiar type. Beyond Worcester there is little to attract special attention until West Brookfield is reached. Here there are beautiful trees.

Chatham, for all its planting, has much more the air of a station. Even without the telegraph poles its purpose could scarcely be mistaken. The same may be said of

Canaan, which is interesting as a very small station with very small grounds. Both these structures are of the more distinct type designed by H. H. Richardson. The grounds at Canaan are so small that they might well have discouraged planting, but one finds that this has been done—around the borders, where it would shut out structures that might possibly be objectionable. There is at least that chance, even on small grounds, if the station be good enough to prevent such an attitude from seeming ridiculous on the part of the railroad.

And now, in running the length of the road, we have seen stations below the level and above the level of the nearest highway, with large grounds and small, with and without natural features of interest, even—at the extremes—stations at a point of junction and in a civic center. Surely among these examples, considered not for themselves but for their suggestiveness, there is many a hint for the suburban or village improvement society that wants to “fix up” the railroad approach to the town. There is not often a more popular place at which to begin work, nor is there often a better one. If the corporation sees that the society has popular support and is in earnest, it is almost sure so to co-operate as to make the movement a success. And success counts for much at the start. It is an old and true saying that nothing succeeds like success.



A Lawn and Shrubbery as viewed from the train at Palmer



